

vtlawhelp.org: Writing for Low-Literacy Readers: Tricks and Tips

Tricks

Use short sentences. Break up long sentences into multiple sentences. (Best tip.)

Use short words.

Use short paragraphs and sections.

Use question and answer format.

Use informative headings and titles.

Use bulleted lists.

Use if-then tables.

Use "I" to refer to the reader in section headings. (What must I do?)

Use "you" to speak to the reader in body of text. (You must bring....)

Use active voice.

Use the present tense.

Make formatting changes to highlight important points. Add:

- bullets,
- headings,
- font size changes, and
- break up paragraphs.

Summarize, then provide details.

Tips

Website readers read only about half the amount of words online as they would in print.

Don't start with a lawyerly tome and expect to edit it "down." Start anew. What are the basic elements a person must know to accomplish her goal?

Map out the major topics and subtopics before you start writing. Does the map show your content will be too long? Are all of the details essential to a nonlawyer? Consider a summary document and a series of separate, more in-depth subtopics.

Write off the top of your head without research.

Check grade level often as you write. It's much easier to rework now than to write at a high grade level and try to fix it later.

Write for your clients, not your colleagues.

Try to shave off a few more grade level points. You almost always can.